

Observations on Religious Freedom in Eritrea

By

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I am Berhane Sium, and I am from Eritrea. Eritrea is in Africa on the Red Sea, to the east of The Sudan and north of Ethiopia. Thank you for the opportunity to talk about religious freedom in Eritrea. I am in frequent contact with citizens in Eritrea, and meet with people who have just left the country, often as escapees.

Since the early 1950s, Eritrea was a part of Ethiopia. In 1993, it won its independence. A constitution was ratified by the people in 1997 to protect democracy, human rights and religious freedom. Article 19, paragraph 4 of the constitution states that:

“Every person shall have the freedom to practice any religion and to manifest such practice.”

However, the dictator and his government who took power will not implement the constitution. An uncivilized regime of cruelty, torture and murder has had control. Countless people have fled the country – those who are caught leaving illegally are tortured or killed.

Religious freedom had never been a problem before the new government came. Muslims and Christians of all sects were free to exist and grow.

However, the new government in 2002 outlawed all church activity except of the four registered faiths, which are:

- Eritrean Orthodox Christian
- Roman Catholic
- Lutheran
- Islam

Outlawed protestant churches have been taken apart:

- First, pastors and key church leaders were arrested, without charges placed
- Then, church buildings were locked up, and people were forbidden to use them for religion
- Then the government took all the property

An example church closed this way was the Kale Hiwot Baptist Church in Asmara, which is the capital city. The church had been giving aid to the poor as a registered NGO. In October of this year, the staff was arrested, all computers and other office equipment and records taken, and the offices locked. Kale Hiwot Church had been overseeing an orphanage, and kindergartens throughout the country. I don't know what has happened to these.

Anyone caught worshiping in an unregistered church or group, even in a private home, is subject to arrest and jail under severe conditions.

One notable example is Helen Berhane, who is a well known evangelical singer. She was jailed following release of a popular CD of her music, and kept for over 2 years because she would not renounce her faith, and was released recently because of pressure from Amnesty International. But she has to be in a wheelchair because of beatings to her right leg. There are many who have been in jail for at least weeks or months – probably over 1,000.

People who will not serve in the military for religious reasons have been jailed in poor conditions, some for over 10 years. Jehovah's Witnesses have been hurt the most with this. Other groups, including Muslims, have been mistreated this way, too. Members of illegal Christian sects in jail are required to renounce their religion before they will be released.

The government replaced the patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church with someone of their own choosing. The officially elected one is now under house arrest.

Thousands of Eritreans have made their way out of the country at risk of torture or death because of extreme human rights and religious mistreatment. We hope and pray for our constitution to be implemented in a universal and sustainable way.

Thank you for your attention.